



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

## 1301.6 - Tasmanian Year Book, 1996

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### Feature Article - Forest fires

Following the disastrous 1967 bushfires in southern Tasmania, in which 62 people died and 1,300 homes were destroyed, an Inquiry was undertaken by D M Chambers, QC. This Inquiry was influential in determining much of the fire legislation, fire management practice, and fire management policy of the 1970s and 1980s.

However, it became apparent that, because of several factors, after 20 years, the findings of the Chambers Inquiry were becoming less relevant. For example, there had been substantial changes in pastoral practices and the distribution of Tasmania's rural population. There was also a larger part of Tasmania's population living on the outskirts of urban areas, often in bushland or rural areas but commuting to metropolitan and urban areas to work.

In September 1993 the Tasmanian Government established a Fire Review Committee headed by Mr W. Bales, QC. Mr Bales was assisted by 6 members and a consultant.

The Committee's terms of reference were:

- To review the role of vegetation fire in the Tasmanian environment including the effects of weather, topography, fuel and changing land uses on fire behaviour.
- To review circumstances in which fuel management is necessary, the best ways of carrying it out and the relative greenhouse effects of planned burning versus wildfires.
- To review public policies as they affect fire management in Tasmania.

The Committee determined that:

"The central issue for the future then is how best to control and manage future vegetation fire so that it continues to play its essential role in maintaining vegetation types without being the cause of unwanted change in natural areas and damage or destruction in other areas."

In the course of its deliberations it received over 60 written submissions and met 15 experts or peak bodies. The Committee of Inquiry recognised that some areas, such as farmland, forests, and conservation reserves, were of particular community concern.

The Committee found that with high commodity prices throughout much of the post-World War II period, more attention was paid to fuel reduction burns in broadacre 'run country'. However, in the 1990s with generally depressed commodity prices there could be a build up of combustible material which in earlier decades may have been burnt.

With regard to forests, and conservation areas the Committee found that vegetation types and the plant and animal communities within them were the result of complex interactions between climate, soils, topography, and fire regimes over a long period of time. The Committee pointed to changes in vegetation type over the past 200 years because of a different approach to fire

management relative to Aboriginal management of fire.

Evidence was heard on the possible greenhouse effects of vegetation fires. Wildfires in forests contribute about 16% of the carbon dioxide released by all vegetation fires in Australia, and prescribed fires release about 11%. The Committee was of the view that forest fires contribute little, if anything, to any long term increase in the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, provided that the total forest biomass remained substantially unaltered. The Committee recommended the allocation of an additional expenditure per annum of about \$800,000.

There were also a number of legislative and regulatory recommendations proposed, including amendments to the Fire Service Act 1979 to establish a Vegetation Fire Management Planning Authority.

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